The following full text is a publisher's version.

For additional information about this publication click this link. https://hdl.handle.net/2066/227281

Please be advised that this information was generated on 2021-02-08 and may be subject to change.
The Power of Popular Music during the 2020 Presidential Campaign

Frank Mehring

In June 2020, the British rock 'n' roll band the Rolling Stones resorted to legal measures to regain control over the political use or misuse of their creative output in the American political arena. The artists refuse to become complicit in Trump's strategic efforts to win the hearts and minds of U.S. voters in the 2020 election. Musicians and politicians recognize that music is a contested medium that can exercise considerable power over an audience participating in a political rally. “BMI have notified the Trump campaign on behalf of the Stones that the unauthorized use of their songs will constitute a breach of its licensing agreement. If Donald Trump disregards the exclusion and persists, then he would face a lawsuit for breaking the embargo and playing music that has not been licensed.”

A few years earlier, Mick Jagger, the lead singer of the band, proudly accepted the invitation of then President Obama to perform at the televised “Red, White and Blues” concert to honor the quintessential American musical genre of blues at the White House during Black History month in 2012. The presence and performance of Mick Jagger paying tribute to African American culture, which also forms the powerful roots of the Stones’ remarkable career, shows how musicians can become agents in generating “alternative archives of history” – in this case to support Obama’s vision of a post-racial society among a global audience of music fans. While President Obama has been celebrated as a “jazz president,” the relationship of President Trump with musicians has been particularly controversial. Hardly any of the invited famous pop artists wanted to perform at his inauguration in January 2017. Compared to Trump’s use of popular music during the previous campaign, more and more high-profile artists are now turning to legal means to assure that their songs are not used in his current campaign. In the following I want to highlight the function and power of music in presidential campaigns of the 20th and 21st centuries and then zoom in on the 2020 campaigns of Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

MUSIC AND U.S. POLITICS

In the United States, there is a long tradition of using popular music to frame political events such as rallies and presidential inaugurations, turning them into cultural performances. How can we make sense of the shared affective power and discursive space in which popular music and politics merge? If popular culture is, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall claims, an arena of consent and resistance in the struggle over cultural meanings, a ground of contestation where ideologies are worked out, then political rallies involving popular music become part of such an arena. Similarly, the use of popular music to underline specific political messages falls under these categories. This opens up new ways to better understand how the sonic experience of politics affects our responses to political agendas. I call this affective nexus of politics and music the sonic state fantasy.

The state needs to offer scenarios in which the citizens (and voters during election campaigns) are invited to internalize rules, norms, agendas, and political brands. Music plays a constitutive role in the creation of state fantasies such as George Herbert Walker Bush’s “New World Order,” William Jefferson Clinton’s “New Cove-
nant with America,” George W. Bush’s “Homeland Security State,” Barrack Hussein Obama’s “Change We Can Believe In,” or Donald John Trump’s “Make America Great Again.” In order to reveal the complex ways in which music unfolds its power, we have to take a close look at the socio-cultural framework in which music is used. In the case of the Trump administration, I will turn to recent political events in which specific songs and artists have been selected and how they became complicit with presidential state fantasies.

Popular music can function as an important repository for collective memory. In the 20th century, American presidents exploited the potential of popular music to create an affective bond between politics, political leaders and the emotions suggested by pop songs. The first to do so was Franklin Delano Roosevelt who turned to “Happy Days are Here Again” from the film Chasing Rainbows (1930) in his 1932 campaign. Frank Sinatra’s hit “High Hopes” framed the campaign of John F. Kennedy. Ronald Reagan evoked history and exceptionalist fantasies by selecting Lee Greenwood’s country hit “God Bless the USA.” Bill Clinton relied on Fleetwood Mac’s “Don’t Stop” among other songs. Some songs such as the use of “Only in America” during the George W. Bush campaign or Hillary Clinton’s “You and I (Were Meant to Fly)” by Celine Dion fit well into a category of so-called one-line wonders. These presidential campaign song titles offer reductive, simple, uplifting messages.

On a surface level, campaign songs connect the image of a presidential candidate with happiness, optimism for a bright future, and progress toward a better tomorrow. On closer scrutiny, however, the songs are more complex than the titles and sing-along choruses imply. As a matter of fact, they are likely to run counter to the message the political candidate wants to exploit. A case in point is the (mis)use of Bruce Springsteen’s song “Born in the USA” in Reagan’s election campaign. Reagan mistook Springsteen’s song for a patriotic celebration of American values and the contributions of U.S. veterans to the American cause of freedom. The song actually offers a double-edged statement about the shortcomings of the American dream, posttraumatic stress syndromes of home-coming soldiers, and the challenge of making ends meet in a struggling American economy. These inherent tensions and contradictions, however, are less important for the branding during a campaign or a political commercial. What matters is the sound of the songs. The repetition of the hook line that is easily remembered acquires a greater presence in the consciousness of the audience than the decoding of narratives expressed in the verses.

The magnitude of musicians’ concerted efforts during the 2020 election campaign to forbid the use of their creative musical output is unprecedented in the history of presidential campaigns. One of the most outspoken critics is Neil Young. He filed a copyright infringement case in August in response to Trump’s use of his music at several political rallies and stops in 2020. Pictured is Young performing in the Ziggo Dome, Amsterdam (photo: Ben Houdijk/Shutterstock.com)
In this context, it is important to understand that music is, primarily, symbolic. In the following section, I will show how popular music can, unwillingly, become complicit with different, ultimately opposing political state fantasies.

UNWELCOME COMPILICITY: MUSICIANS AND POLITICS
The magnitude of musicians’ concerted efforts during the 2020 election campaign to forbid the use of their creative musical output is unprecedented in the history of presidential campaigns. One of the most outspoken critics is the Canadian singer/songwriter Neil Young who became a naturalized American citizen in 2020. He escalated his hatred toward Trump, calling Trump a “disgrace to my country” who should refrain from using Young’s songs to frame the reelection campaign. Young officially filed a copyright infringement case in August in response to Trump’s use of “Rockin’ in the Free World” and “Devil’s Sidewalk” at several political rallies and stops in 2020. The lawsuit states that Young is seeking “statutory damages in the maximum amount allowed for willful copyright infringement” because of Trump’s use of a number of songs.2 In addition to popular groups and artists such as R.E.M., Adele, Tom Petty, Twisted Sister and Elton John, I would like to draw attention to the Rolling Stones. The band has played a special role in American presidential campaigns in the last decade.

One of the songs that Trump repeatedly used during the 2016 Republican primaries and the presidential election was a staple in the Rolling Stones’ catalogue of more than 400 compositions: “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” from the 1969 album Let It Bleed. Tuning to one of the most successful acts in rock music history, the Trump team enrolled the Stones in the effort to “make America great again” recognizing that the band in a sense became “Americanized” when they were inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame at the end of the Reagan presidency. The audience was exposed to the song after the end of Trump’s speech at the June 20, 2020 rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma as a kind of sonic exclamation mark to this speech. The song played a crucial role in Trump’s first election campaign and is supposed to do similar cultural work in 2020.

YOU CAN’T ALWAYS GET WHAT YOU WANT, BUT …
As with other playlists for presidential campaign rallies, the songs are selected for their “bite value.” In addition, they need to have the potential to emotionally touch a large group of people in a positive fashion. Third, they should transmit a subliminal message about the target voters, which will shape the future of the new presidency. How do these categories relate to “You Can’t Always Get What You Want”?

The song has been a staple in the Stones’ live set list for fifty years and was named the 100th greatest song of all time by Rolling Stone magazine in 2004. The song’s multi-generational appeal allows it to subliminally engage audiences before the appearance of the presidential candidate. In addition, the song features a catchy sing-along chorus. It thus can unfold its potential for audiences to actively participate in a fantasy of unity on a sonic level. While the song has been described by Jagger as referring to the drug-infused scene in Chelsea in the late 1960s, the inclusion of “You Can’t Always Get What You Want” is designed to activate a different response during the political campaign rally.

While the lyrics of the first part of the chorus claim that “you can’t always get what you want,” the final conclusion after invoking the parental warning three times, is more self-assertive: “But if you try sometimes well you might find/ You get what you need.” Beyond the participatory effect of the composition, the affirmative rhetoric implies for the audience in the campaign rally that Trump will ultimately “get what he needs” to realize his campaign slogan to “make America great again” – including “building a wall and making the Mexicans pay for it,” creating jobs in an unprecedented fashion, and reversing political decrees of the Obama administration.

Depending on the socio-political framework, music may embody political values and experiences. It may organize our response to society as political thought and action, both serving as a vehicle of political expression and being that expression. Hence, music’s relation to politics can to a certain degree be both complicit and function as a free-floating signifier. If musical style is often more important than content, and therefore the style is the content, then music at the Trump rallies should be analyzed beyond the lyrical level. What about the sonic dimension? “You can’t Always get what you want” starts with a children’s choir suggesting a return to a simpler time of childhood. Rather than presenting the song as an offspring of the African American blues and gospel tradition, the Rolling Stones added a sense of irony: The London Bach Choir was chosen over a more obvious African American Baptist choir. Rather than emphasizing African American elements of the musical DNA of the Stones, the choir offers a racial counterpart, which subliminally served Trump’s target group of white Republican voters. In the words of Stones guitarist Keith Richards, the Stones decided to include a “straight chorus. In other words, let’s try to reach the people up there as well. It was a dare, kind of… And then, what if we got one of the best choirs in England, all these white, lovely singers, and do it that way? […] It was a beautiful juxtaposition.”3 This seven-and-a-half-minute finale to Let It Bleed has
been described as a sonic stage offering a binary juxtaposition of the present and the past, England vs. America, African American versus “white” music productions, the “black” versus the “white” church. Sonically, Trump’s campaign builds on a white-washed version of African/ American blues and rock ‘n’ roll.

UNDERMINING POLITICAL AGENDAS VIA MUSIC AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In the time of social media and ever-present cameras of citizens in public/work spaces, music can also be used as a means to counterbalance the hegemonic narrative of, for example, a promotional visit to showcase the president’s dedication to his fellow-citizens’ health and safety. When Trump visited a N95 mask manufacturing plant in Phoenix, Arizona on May 6, 2020 and all cameras were on Trump, a worker decided to activate the plant’s loudspeaker system to play a well-known rock song which offered a critical sonic frame for the visual narrative of the clip. In line with his efforts to downplay the effects of the coronavirus, Trump did not wear a mask in the plant while the plant workers covered their noses and mouths. The unexpected soundtrack featured the following lines from the Guns N’ Roses cover of the title song of the James Bond film Live and Let Die (1973) composed by Paul McCartney: “If this ever-changin’ world/ In which we live in/ Makes you give in and cry/ Say live and let die …” While at the time of the plant visit, Trump’s dismissal of the potential threat of the pandemic to his fellow citizens had been the cause of 70,000 deaths in the US (almost a quarter of the global amount at the time), the playing of the song over what was supposed to be a promotional clip to showcase the strength of the president turned the situation around, exposing Trump as a self-acclaimed leader who is willing to sacrifice lives for his own political survival. While this clip went viral with four million views within a short time, Trump, in turn, tweeted an alternative version of the video in which he added a patriotic, cinematic soundtrack of classical music with fanfares to celebrate his allegedly remarkable work to “make America great again.” In the original clip, music functioned as a means of negation, protest and dissent. The sheer unlimited access of citizens to audio-visual content on streaming devices at any given time leads not only to furthering the processes of democratization in the sphere of culture production and distribution but also increases the power of music to frame any given event as a political performance.
DEMOCRATIC RESPONSES DURING TIMES OF CORONA

In contrast to Donald Trump, his Democratic competitor Joe Biden has refrained from large-scale rallies due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential dangers for the attendees. Hence, the traditional format of campaign videos is all the more important as a tool to attract voters. One of the strategies in using music as a sonic frame for political messages deploys American singer, songwriter, actor, and record producer Justin Timberlake’s 2002 Grammy-award hit “Cry Me a River” to breathe new life into Biden’s campaign. The video, posted on the former vice-president’s social accounts, plays the song over video footage of President Trump from his Fox News town hall at the D.C. Lincoln Memorial. Between his self-pitying comments about being treated in a particularly bad fashion – a tactic that refers to a well-known catalogue of institutions and people from the so-called “fake media” to the IRS – the song is heard playing. The caption on the video reads, “Over 1 million cases of COVID-19. Almost 70,000 dead. What is upsetting President Trump? Tough questions from the press. Cry me a river, Mr. President.” The aesthetic strategy of the clip is reminiscent of the famous American director Frank Capra who used similar tactics in World War II propaganda films to rally support for the American war effort. The alleged justification of the Nazi claim to rule the world now became a rallying cry for American soldiers to fight for freedom and democracy, which were under threat.

Adding the sounds and lyrics of Timberlake’s hit-song to the footage of Trump inverts Trump’s original message in order to make a counterargument. The repeated complaints about being treated worse than Abraham Lincoln are ridiculed by the famous song whose central hook line – “cry me a river” – is recontextualized to unfold its subversive sonic power in the media arena of presidential campaign ads. Towards the end of the clip, the camera zooms from a low angle to revel in the proud, stern, far-seeing face of Lincoln, seated in his Memorial. While Trump is sonically framed like a petulant boy crying, Biden’s name is projected in capital letters over the celebrated unifier: BIDEN PRESIDENT.

CONCLUSION:

Popular music can be molded to do ideological work via its immediate affective potential to produce state fantasies – whether they are post-racial or white supremacist. During the months of COVID-19, music at public rallies has played a less significant role than in preceding campaigns. The worker at the mask factory who “hijacked” the facility’s sound system during Trump’s visit found a means to use the digital access to popular songs in order to suggest an alternative narrative to the official agenda of a leader who seems to care little about his citizens’ health. The sonic framework suggested a hidden agenda behind Trump’s propaganda to save the American economy no matter the costs of human lives and thereby assure his re-election: to live and let die.

Frank Mehring is Chair and Professor of the department for American Studies at Radboud University. His research focuses on cultural transfer, migration, intermediality, and the function of music in transnational contexts.

Would you like to react?
Mail the editor: redactie@atlcom.nl.